# A Challenge with the College Budget

**by AARON MERMELSTEIN**

**LEVEL:** Mainly college and university students, although the activity could be adapted for others

**TIME REQUIRED:** Anywhere from one hour to three hours, depending on the size of the class, learners' language ability, and activity extensions

**GOALS:** To use language skills to compromise and make decisions; to practice using vocabulary related to budgets; to consider different ways to improve the local college/campus

**MATERIALS:** A list of proposed projects to improve the campus (see Figure 2) that can be printed out, written on a board or poster paper, shared with students electronically, or displayed on a screen; a list of criteria for making decisions about which projects to fund (*optional*)

**BACKGROUND:** The following is a problem-based learning (PBL) activity for the communicative language teaching (CLT) classroom. The Center for Innovation in Teaching & Learning at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign defines PBL as "a teaching method in which complex real-world problems are used as the vehicle to promote student learning of concepts and principles as opposed to direct presentation of facts and concepts" (n.d.). The University of Louisiana Monroe defines CLT as "an approach that aims to achieve communicative rather than linguistic competence through learner interaction" (2021).

The intended group for this activity is post-secondary English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) students or adult learners.

## PREPARATION

Teachers need to make sure that students have learned the specialized vocabulary needed to discuss budgets and make informed decisions. The terms suggested and defined in Figure 1 will help ESL/EFL students understand the key concepts and processes involved in managing and discussing college budgets within a committee setting; teachers might want to include other terms as well.

Teachers must also prepare a list of proposed projects that could be completed at the students' campus. The sample list in Figure 2 includes 16 possible projects; teachers can adapt the list to fit their own context, if necessary.

## PROCEDURE

**1.** The first thing a teacher should say to the class is, "Today we are going to do some group work. I'm going to put all of you into small groups called a budget committee. A budget committee is a group of people who work together to decide how to spend money."

**"Imagine that your college has proposed 16 new projects for the next fiscal year. Unfortunately, they have just learned that eight of the projects must be cut for budgetary reasons."**

2. Depending on learners' abilities and background knowledge, go over the vocabulary terms in Figure 1 and make sure students understand them before proceeding. (This step could also be done in a previous class or for homework.) Teachers can select the vocabulary to target and may include additional terms.

3. Explain further by saying, "Every year a college budget is needed to improve the learning environment and upgrade the standard of education. Imagine that your college has proposed 16 new projects for the next fiscal year. Unfortunately, they have just learned that eight of the projects must be cut for budgetary reasons. In other words, the college does not have enough money for all of the projects, and only eight of them may be kept."

4. Divide the class into groups of about four students each.

5. Tell the students, "Your group must decide which eight projects are to be kept and which eight projects are to be dropped. Your group must discuss each item, and not just vote for which ones

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**budget** – A plan for managing income and expenses, detailing how much money is available and how it will be spent

**committee** – A group of people appointed to make decisions or recommendations on specific matters, such as budget allocation

**expense** – The cost or amount of money spent on something, such as books, supplies, or housing

**expenditure** – The amount of money spent on specific items or activities, which is tracked to manage a budget effectively

**revenue** – The total income received by the college from various sources, such as tuition fees, donations, and grants

**deficit** – A situation where expenses exceed revenue, resulting in a shortfall that needs to be addressed by the budget committee

**proposal** – A detailed plan or suggestion put forward for consideration, often outlining how funds should be used or allocated

**approval** – The formal consent or agreement to a budget plan or financial proposal, often required before implementation

**forecast** – A prediction or estimate of future financial conditions, such as expected income and expenditures, used for planning purposes

**adjustments** – Changes made to a budget based on actual financial performance or updated needs, to ensure that the budget remains balanced and effective

**allocation** – The process of distributing resources or funds among different departments, projects, or purposes

**Figure 1. Vocabulary needed to discuss budgets within a committee setting**

## A reality of creating a budget is that funds are not always available.

you want. You should give reasons for and against choosing each project.

"When you have discussed all of the projects, you must choose the eight projects that are best for the college. Your group must make decisions based on the majority of the group's members. If you are in the minority, your job is to try to convince the other members of the group to select the items you want and vote the same way you vote. However, don't feel too bad if the other people in your group disagree with you. Just try your best.

"Your group must give your reasons to keep or eliminate each project. You must explain why your group is making each decision."

**6.** Hand out the list of proposed projects (see Figure 2) to each group, write it on the board or poster paper, or display/share it on a screen.

**7.** Groups discuss and come to a decision. The time needed for this will vary.

**8.** Each group reveals the projects they have chosen, giving their reasons. In small classes, this can be done in a whole-class format. In large classes, two or three groups can join and share their decisions and reasons with one another.

An alternative is for the teacher or a student to survey the groups, going over the list of projects and asking one-by-one whether groups have voted to fund the project or not.

### EXTENSIONS

**1.** Have each group place all of the campus upgrades in order of the most important or relevant to your school. They must give their reasons for selecting the top, most important upgrades.

**2.** Have all of the groups come together as one large budget committee. Select a committee leader, usually a class leader, and have them lead the larger committee. As a larger committee, have the students evaluate their eight choices for upgrades and then select half of those projects to use. Again, they should be having an open and respectful discussion where everyone is allowed to speak.

**3.** A reality of creating a budget is that funds are not always available. Therefore, another extension is to let the students know that they need to eliminate more projects and determine the upgrades that would be best for the school. (It should be up to the teacher to decide just how many upgrades can be selected; some teachers may ask their students to decide on only one project to fund.)



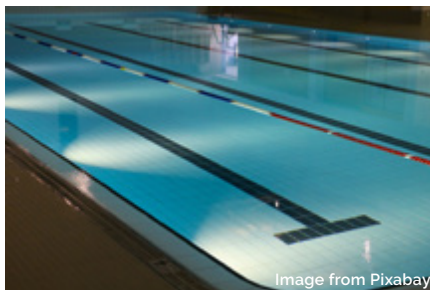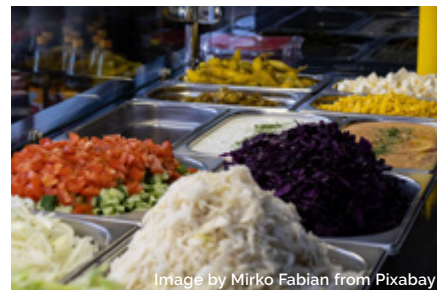Image by OpenClipart-Vectors from Pixabay
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**Improved bus service? A swimming pool? More on-campus food choices? Or something else?**

**4.** Each group must come up with three extra original ideas for the budget committee to implement in addition to the eight ideas they kept from the list. They must also give their reasons why each project is an important upgrade.

## VARIATIONS

**1.** This depends on the English level of the learners. The teacher can offer the class a list of criteria for selecting an upgrade. For example, "The project must benefit at least 60 percent of the students or faculty."

**2.** This is a more advanced variation, again depending on the English level of the learners. The teacher can have each group come up with their own criteria for selecting an upgrade, which they will need to write out and then later explain to the rest of the class.

## REFERENCES

Center for Innovation in Teaching & Learning at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. n.d. "Problem-Based Learning." *Teaching & Learning*. https://citl.illinois.edu/citl-101/teaching-learning/resources/teaching-strategies/problem-based-learning-(pbl)

University of Louisiana Monroe. 2021. "The Communicative Language Approach in ESL Education." August 4. https://online.ulm.edu/degrees/education/med/curriculum-and-instruction/communicative-language-approach/

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1) Increased bus service to and from the campus

2) A heated swimming pool, a 400-meter track, and an outdoor stadium

3) New restaurant complexes with vegetarian and fast-food areas

4) Air-conditioning units for every classroom

5) Environmental protection projects and campaigns

6) More scholarships for outstanding and lower-income students

7) A center for relaxation and music

8) A fine arts/design gallery and exhibition hall

9) Large, open, green spaces as parkland

10) Improvement of the library facilities and resources

11) An advertising campaign to build up the school's reputation

12) More visiting professors from other countries

13) More funding for student clubs and associations

14) Expansion of the computer center and increased access for all students

15) A counseling center for students and faculty

16) Luxury housing for foreign teachers and professors

**Figure 2. Sample list of proposed projects**